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- (1) Obama administration's challenges: Placing high priority on Japan a challenge

ASAHI (Page 10) (Abridged slightly)  
January 29, 2009

Yoichi Kato, Washington

On January 13, Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton attended her confirmation hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. What she stated before the committee regarding Japan-U.S. relations attracted much attention.

She specifically said: "Our alliance with Japan is a cornerstone of American policy in Asia, essential to maintaining peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region."

There is nothing new in this statement. But in her contribution to the Foreign Affairs November/December 2007 issue, she wrote: "Our relationship with China will be the most important bilateral relationship in the world in this century." The absence of reference to Japan puzzled persons concerned in Japan. What Clinton said on January 13 was a complete about-face. "She realized her mistake," notes Michael Green, Japan Chair for the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Japan, South Korea and Australia were always discussed in a package in confirmation hearings of past nominees. Hillary Clinton singled out Japan in her hearing, and that made other countries in the region jealous, according to a source connected to Japan-U.S. relations.

Additionally, President Obama has appointed former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell as assistant secretary of state and former regional coordinator of U.S. forces in Okinawa Willace Gregson as assistant secretary of defense. Both are Japan experts.

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Soon after winning the presidency, Obama called Prime Minister Taro Aso, placing Japan in the first group of nine countries to contact. This also showed his consideration for Japan.

Meanwhile, Treasury Secretary-designate Timothy Geithner during his confirmation hearing accused China of manipulating its currency rate, drawing fire from Beijing. The Obama administration's stance is described by some in Washington as pro-Japan, anti-China.

Given such favorable consideration by the Obama administration, the question is if Japan can live up to its expectations.

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs made public last fall the results of its public opinion survey that showed strong expectations by Americans of Japan to play a greater military role. The Chicago Council also pointed out: "What has surfaced as the biggest challenge for U.S.-Japan relations is the gap in expectations. For the management of the bilateral alliance, it is essential for the upcoming U.S. administration to dissolve this and find (Japan's) appropriate tasks in assistance to Afghanistan and other matters."

Japanese and U.S. government sources share this view. Sources connected with the U.S. government are well aware that Japan is not allowed to dispatch the Self-Defense Force on an overseas mission that would be combat based. As mentioned on Jan. 27 by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Michael Mullen, what is expected of Japan is to make contributions in nonmilitary fields, such as medical care, economic development, and education.

At the same time, there are persons like James Shinn, who served as deputy undersecretary of defense for Asia and Pacific until last fall, raising a question about Japan's paradoxical stance: "How could Japan seek a permanent seat on the UN Security Council while shirking its responsibility to carry out activities endorsed by the UNSC?"

Smart alliance nowhere in sight

In her confirmation hearing, Hillary Clinton repeatedly mentioned "smart power," a clever mix of "hard power," such as military power, and "soft power" like values and culture.

Japan is required to become a "smart" U.S. ally. "Smart power" has been promoted by Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye, who is

expected to become new ambassador to Japan. In an interview with the Asahi Shimbun in November 2007, Nye discussed the meaning of "smart power" this way: "A smart ally means a country that can well integrate its own hard power with soft power. As far as Japan is concerned, it is essential to have not only soft power that attracts neighboring countries in Asia but also the ability to join activities to maintain the international order by utilizing the Self-Defense Forces."

The difference in expectations is also evident over the issue of U.S. force realignment.

Over the construction of the envisaged Futenma Air Station replacement facility, there is thinking in Okinawa and part of the Japanese government to implement the project by making changes to the plan. The U.S. side, including sources connected with the Obama administration, is in no mood to accept any changes to the plan. The U.S. side is keeping a watchful eye on a move in Japan to reduce the

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so-called sympathy budget, or Japan's host-nation support for the costs of stationing U.S. forces in the country.

As for the abduction issue, Clinton during her confirmation hearing indicated that the Obama administration must put greater emphasis on resolving the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. At the same time, Japan has received a request from a U.S. government official not to use (the abduction issue) as a litmus test for Japan-U.S. relations. There is a subtle difference in stances of the two sides in the Obama administration.

Strong political leadership must be displayed to help resolve such a difference in expectations. But given the divided Diet, there seems to be limits to what Japan can do. There are no prospects for improving the situation, either. On the U.S. side, there are those willing to watch the situation patiently, thinking that there is no other option, and those alarmed at the situation, as seen in former Deputy Defense Undersecretary Richard Lawless' comment: "If this situation persists, Japan's presence will continue to diminish."

What matters ultimately is what role Japan intends to play in its relationship with the United States and the international community.

(2) With order to MSDF to prepare for anti-piracy dispatch, civilian control left behind

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 3) (Abridged)  
January 29, 2009

Shigeru Handa, senior editorial writer

Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada yesterday ordered the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to prepare for antipiracy deployment to waters off the coast of Somalia in eastern Africa. The MSDF's anti-piracy mission is based on the invocation of a maritime security policing provision in the Self-Defense Forces Law. The government is said to be looking into the feasibility of a new law for anti-piracy measures. However, the government does not even have a draft bill ready. Meanwhile, the Diet has hardly discussed the government's deployment plan. No cabinet decision is needed for the government's masterplan that sets a period of time for deployment, so the SDF may have to act there at its discretion.

The SDF will be sent overseas under the SDF law for the first time since its dispatch to the Persian Gulf in 1991. At that time, the government sent MSDF minesweepers to the Persian Gulf for the safe navigation of Japanese ships. The MSDF there removed mines.

The SDF's dispatch to the Persian Gulf was its first overseas mission with no experience. At that time, the government did not set any guidelines for the SDF to use weapons. "If there is a ship coming to attack, we would ram our ship against it to stop it," an MSDF officer said when he was on the minesweeping mission there.

The MSDF's mission in the Persian Gulf ended without any mishaps.

However, the government continued to be careful about sending the SDF overseas. In 1992, the government and the ruling parties established a law for cooperation on United Nations peacekeeping operations or the so-called PKO cooperation law. Under this law, the government sent Ground Self-Defense Force troops to Cambodia.

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The SDF deployments to the Indian Ocean and Iraq were under two different special measures laws, the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law and the Iraq Special Measures Law. The SDF, since its deployment in Cambodia, has gone through overseas missions over the past 17 years under a number of special laws for overseas activities. As it stands, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto) are both willing to establish a permanent law instead of having a special measures law enacted each time.

If the government sends the SDF overseas only under the SDF law, it may well be criticized for ignoring past circumstances. There are problems that should be cleared up through Diet deliberations. However, since there is no bill before the Diet, the problems remain up in the air. For example, one issue is what to do about the government's guidelines for the SDF to use weapons overseas. The SDF's use of weapons on its overseas missions is currently limited to legitimate self-defense or emergency evacuation only. This constraint is in place also for the MSDF's antipiracy maritime security policing activities off Somalia, as well as under the PKO cooperation law and the two special laws for antiterror activities in the Indian Ocean and assistance to Iraq.

However, the MSDF's anti-piracy maritime policing action under the SDF law is to protect Japanese ships and Japan-linked ships only. Unlike the SDF law, the PKO cooperation law and the antiterror and Iraq special measures laws allow SDF members to use weapons in order to protect themselves and "those under their control," as well. These three laws make it possible for the SDF to carry out international cooperation.

The question is when to dispatch the SDF, where to operate, and what kinds of troops to send out for overseas activities. Under the PKO cooperation law, the government specified these matters in an "implementing plan." Under the antiterror and Iraq special measures laws, the government likewise specified them in a "masterplan" and made a cabinet decision on it. In addition, the government is required under these laws to ask the Diet for its approval of SDF activities or otherwise report SDF activities to the Diet. In other words, the Diet also participates in the process of sending the SDF overseas, thereby shaping the "civilian control" of the SDF under the cabinet and the Diet.

In the case of the MSDF's maritime policing activities in waters off Somalia, however, the government is not required to come up with any plan or even to make a Diet report. This could slacken civilian control. As a result, the SDF's discretion will increase. However, the SDF's responsibility will increase, as well. "The commanding officer over there and the headquarters here will communicate," MSDF Chief of Staff Keiji Akahoshi said. "That's important," he added, indicating that the government will make a decision if and when there is a problem.

### (3) MSDF dispatch to the sea of pirates

SANKEI (Page 1) (Full)  
January 30, 2009

Yukio Okamoto, foreign affairs analyst

Last year, more than 100 ships were attacked by pirates in waters off the coast of Somalia. According to findings from UKMTO, a

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Dubai-based antipiracy organization that files records regarding all damage caused by pirates, three Japanese or Japanese-related ships

were seajacked by pirates. In addition, three other ships were attacked. There is now less damage because of the northeastern monsoon blowing in the Gulf of Aden and the new sealane there. However, when the weather serves, there will be more trouble again. Ships between Europe and Japan pass through this sea. Trade with Europe is being threatened.

Warships from about 20 countries, including China and Malaysia, are already participating in antipiracy operations. Pirates will scuttle away when they see warships. In this way, Japanese ships have been saved as well. Deterrence with saber-rattling is important. The Japanese government has also begun to prepare the Maritime Self-Defense Force for deployment to waters off Somalia under the existing law. Japan has been falling behind other countries. However, I would like to welcome this move.

There were pirates even before Christ was born. Today, pirates use rockets and modern IT equipment to attack foreign ships. The Somali pirates used to be fishermen. They have connections with local military groups and they are armed-just like the one-time "Murakami Suigun" naval force in the Inland Sea of Japan. When local fishermen saw Chinese and other foreign fishing boats operating in the sea before their eyes, they drove away those foreign fishing boats. Over time, fishermen began taking cellphones and other devices. Furthermore, they went on escalating their hunting to capture cargo and crewmen for huge ransoms. Nowadays, piracy is the biggest business in Somalia. They will continue hunting for game as long as Somalia is in a state of anarchy.

Pirates can easily board a defenseless merchant ship that can only use water to flush out attackers. They take the captured ship back to points off the Somali ports of Eyl and Galad. Even though they are rounded up by an international naval fleet, civilized countries will abide by the law, so they are in no danger of being killed. Local youths, each with an annual income of 600 dollars or so, can make money to the extent of 50,000 dollars a year after becoming pirates. It is a low-risk, high-return crime, and they cannot stop it.

I recently visited the Gulf and met with UKMTO and international fleet officials. One of them told me, "We are all mariners, so we will do our best to protect Japanese ships as well." They wanted Japan to participate in the CTF-151, which is a newly organized fleet against pirates. "The sealane we must protect is as long as 1,800 kilometers," a fleet official said. "So," he added, "we need more vessels and helicopters and patrol planes."

To eliminate piracy, Somalia must have a government with law-enforcing capacity. However, Somalia is currently under the control of the Somalia Islamic Council, which is a fundamentalist organization. Somalia's interim government was under the protection of Ethiopian troops. Ethiopia, however, has now pulled its troops out of Somalia. (Ironically, Arab pirates rampant in the Arabian Sea in old times had nothing to fear other than Ethiopian soldiers.) Moreover, those Somali pirates are based in a half-independent region called Puntland. For the time being, Somalia can be little expected to establish an effective government.

By the way, Social Democratic Party President Mizuho Fukushima was invited to a Democratic Party of Japan convention. She was quoted as

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saying in a speech there: "We're against sending the Self-Defense Forces to wipe out the pirates. We can't agree even if the government creates a law. Nothing is more important than human life." This could be one way of thinking. However, human life is important for the people of other countries as well. Indeed, Japanese ships must be secured. Even so, we are not allowed, also from the perspective of ethics, to say anything like this: "We should make the people of other countries take on the risk of escorting Japanese ships." In the end, the answer is that Japan has no choice but to give up trading with Europe. She should have said so clearly to the audience.

(4) Objections to dispatching the MSDF to Somalia under tight weapons-use rules -- Discussion between DPJ Vice President Seiji

Maehara and Yoshiko Sakurai

SHUKAN SHINCHO (Pp. 50-53) (Abridged slightly)  
February 5, 2009

Sakurai: There is a growing international effort to combat piracy in waters off Somalia. China decided late last year to dispatch three vessels -- two naval vessels and a fueler, and has now begun working as a "major power." South Korea, too, has decided to send its naval vessels. Meanwhile, Japan is still conducting discussions with the aim of dispatching the Maritime Self-Defense Force by late March. That being said, I have some questions for Mr. Maehara, who is vice president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and an expert on security affairs. J. Thomas Schieffer served as U.S. Ambassador to Japan for three years and nine months. Before leaving his post, Mr. Schieffer held a press conference on January 14 in which he said: "Pirates are criminals. I find it difficult to understand why it takes such a long time for Japan to make a decision to protect its own people from pirates." The Ambassador, who has a deep understanding of Japan's special circumstances, including Article 9, criticized the country outright that day, indicating his difficulty to understand this situation. I think Japan's response is so slow that it goes beyond comprehension.

Maehara: The United Nations has unanimously adopted three resolutions against piracy off Somalia. Japan should enact a special law and quickly dispatch the MSDF based on those resolutions, which Japan supported. The government is trying to dispatch the MSDF under SDF Law Article 82 governing maritime policing activities. We can't help but become cautious about such an approach. That is because for one thing, the Police Duties Execution Law will be applied to maritime policing activities. To begin with, SDF Law Article 82 is designed to allow the MSDF to take over only when the Japan Coast Guard cannot deal with a situation in waters near Japan. In other words, it is not based on a situation where the MSDF goes all the way to waters off Somalia to protect Japanese merchant ships there. It's not illegal but the grounds are unsound.

Sakurai: Under the maritime policing provision, the MSDF would be bound hand and foot, and the members won't be able to perform their duties, as expected.

Maehara: Probably not. Under the government's interpretation of the Constitution, Japan is not allowed to use force overseas. That has been a bottleneck in conducting peacekeeping operations (PKO) and establishing the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law. In waters off Somalia, the MSDF can use weapons limited to legitimate self-defense and emergency evacuation. It sounds funny, but there is one more

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instance. They are allowed to shoot someone who was sentenced to three years or more in prison. Even in such a case, weapons used by the MSDF must be on the same level as those of pirates.

Sakurai: I understand that the MSDF is not allowed to use overwhelming firepower even against criminals like pirates and that they must not, in principle, inflict damage on humans.

Maehara: They can attack a pirate ship but must not sink it, because such would inflict damage on humans. To begin with, there is a tremendous gap between a destroyer and a pirate ship in terms of fighting and defense power. So pirate ships are usually armed with things like rocket launchers. If MSDF members use weapons on the same level as those used by pirates in fighting back, that might very well end up sinking the pirate ship. Doesn't that constitute the use of force, which is prohibited under the Constitution? There is no military court in Japan, so wouldn't the SDF members who resulted in such a consequence be forced to face criminal penalties later on? The answers to these questions remain unclear. Forced to perform their duties under such ambiguous conditions, SDF members won't be able to make a quick decision on an attacks or danger. Conversely, they might suffer damage.

Sakurai: Under such circumstances, sufficiently protecting Japanese vessels might be difficult. China has been protecting Taiwanese vessels, as well. There might arise a situation where Japanese

ships, too, would have to be protected by Chinese naval vessels. Such could occur when Japan is placed under China's protection and China gains superiority over Japan. Such must be convenient for China that proposed to the United States dividing up Pacific control, but is unacceptable for Japan.

Vessels not subject to MSDF escort

Sakurai: When North Korean spy ships entered waters off the Noto Peninsula in 1999, an order for maritime policing operations was issued. But the spy ships were aware that Japan was not allowed to attack them, so they just kept sailing on to move out of Japanese territorial waters. One of the boats came to a halt due to engine trouble, but Japan could not do anything about it. Enemies who know that the Japanese side does not fire back unless they attack first flee from Japanese waters without fail. It is also said that once dispatched to waters off Somalia, the MSDF will protect only Japanese-registered vessels and ships carrying Japanese cargoes. Even if they encounter a foreign vessel under attack by pirates, they will have to remain on the sidelines because they are under the maritime policing provision of the Japanese law. They would be despised and scorned as a result.

Maehara: I agree. The maritime policing clause would not allow them to rescue such a vessel. I believe Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada is engaged in tough discussions. If a Japanese ship happens to be in close proximity of a foreign vessel, the MSDF would block a pirate ship from approaching the foreign vessel in the pretext of protecting it. I'm sure the defense minister is envisioning a variety of scenarios like that. But when such a pretext cannot be found, the MSDF would have to conclude that (protecting a foreign ship) is not part of their duties.

Sakurai: I cannot imagine how the international community would react to Japan if such a situation occurred. Kuwait did not express its gratitude to Japan for just making financial contributions

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during the first Gulf War. Back then, Japanese troops were not stationed in the Gulf. But this time around, Japanese troops might not be able to help a foreign vessel that is right in front of them. Fierce criticism is certain to arise. Despite that, when asked about maritime policing operations that would tightly bind the MSDF's hand and foot, Prime Minister Aso answered, 'I don't think any pirate ship will attack a destroyer.' Is that the view supporting the dispatch of the MSDF?

Maehara: In October 2000, a U.S. vessel equipped with the Aegis system was crippled by an attack by a rubber boat carrying bombs in the Gulf of Aden. So no one can say for sure that there will be no suicide attack in waters off Somalia.

Sakurai: MSDF vessels could become targets. It is too optimistic to think that the presence of destroyers makes the surrounding waters safe and protected. I strongly believe Japan needs military power that can actually protect vessels instead of artificial military strength.

Maehara: The SDF has long discussed whether the weapons-use criteria based on the Police Duties Execution Law are really sufficient. The set of criteria still exists as a bottleneck. It would too time consuming to amend the Constitution for resolving this issue. In an effort to clarify the government's constitutional interpretation, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe set up an expert panel tasked to make recommendations on four scenarios, such as intercepting ballistic missiles that may be targeted at the United States, protecting U.S. naval vessels under attack in international waters, and defending foreign troops that come under attack, for instance, during providing reconstruction assistance in Iraq. It was regrettable that Mr. Abe quit as prime minister before the panel come up with its recommendations. The panel presented its report endorsing the use of the right to collective self-defense to Mr. Abe's successor, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda.

(5) Cracks widening in Machimura faction: Senior members applying pressure on Hidenao Nakagawa to contain criticism of administration

Cracks in the Machimura faction, the largest faction in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), are widening. With former Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa's strong opposition to Prime Minister Taro Aso's policy of hiking the sales tax as an occasion, senior officials of the faction, such as former Prime Ministers Yoshiro Mori and Shinzo Abe, who are close to Aso, have tightened the figurative noose around Nakagawa. The moves of Nakagawa, who is even eyeing political realignment, could trigger the disintegration of the faction. As such, part of the aim of the leadership in placing pressure on Nakagawa is to contain his criticism of the administration. Internal discord will likely continue for some time to come.

Touches on possible review of party leadership system

Nakagawa during a plenary meeting of the Machimura faction on January 29 underscored: "The very fact that such talk has cropped up will bother the Aso cabinet. We should stand together as a group." "Such talk" indicates criticism of Nakagawa by senior officials of the Machimura faction and an argument calling for reviewing the factional system.

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Abe on the 27th said this while visiting Saudi Arabia: "There is an argument that a troika leadership structure for the faction is somewhat unnatural. We will probably reach a decision to change it." He referred to a possible review of the Machimura faction's collective leadership system. Referring to Abe's remark, one senior official of the Machimura faction explained, "What he meant was that Machimura will be reinstated to the faction chairmanship, with Nakagawa being ousted."

Mori, supreme advisor, is gradually tightening the noose around Nakagawa, repeatedly telling people close to him, "If Mr. Nakagawa opts out of the faction, I will not dissuade him."

Mori, the most influential member of the faction, has strengthened criticism of Nakagawa, with the party presidential election last year as the occasion. Many of the Machimura faction's senior officials, such as Mori, Abe and Machimura, supported Aso in that election, while Nakagawa supported former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike, splitting the unity of the faction. Nakagawa then strengthened criticism of the Aso administration over the sales tax. He has been a pain in the neck for the administration.

Nakagawa is eyeing realignment of political circles. Some faction members said that if he tries to split the faction, by jockeying for realignment, he should leave the faction immediately. Since some faction members, such as Ichita Yamamoto, have fallen in step with Nakagawa, voices are being heard calling for reducing the number of Nakagawa sympathizers by lessening the influence of Nakagawa before the next Lower House election. Those members are presumably calculating that if they insinuate that they will sideline Nakagawa from the leadership, he will tone down criticism of the administration. Seishiro Eto and Seiken Sugiura, senior members of the faction who are close to Nakagawa, on the afternoon of the 29 directly asked Mori in the Diet building to repair his relations with him, noting, "Junior members are worried about relations between you and Mr. Nakagawa. Mori replied, "I have never said I will review the three-leader system."

Mori reportedly said when he had dined with former Upper House Caucus Chairman Mikio Aoki and business leaders in Tokyo on the evening of the 28th, "I will not allow him to break up the party."

Nakagawa posted a comment on his website on the evening of the 29th, which went that he wants to make necessary preparations within the party, while supporting Prime Minister Aso, so that the party can make progress and develop over the mid- to long-term. He thus stressed a stance of remaining in the party to support the administration and continue activities. However, it will be difficult to repair the fissure, once created. The source of



contention will likely linger.

(6) Editorial: Clarify points of dispute in Diet debate in run-up for next Lower House election

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)  
January 30, 2009

Interpellations by each party's representative in connection with Prime Minister Taro Aso's policy speech have started. On the first day, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama took the podium and asked the prime minister about his

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views on the practice of amakudari ("descent from heaven" or retired officials landing cushy jobs with companies related to their previous duties) by central government employees, and on the sale tax issue.

The current term for Lower House members ends this September. The Lower House could be dissolved at any moment once the fiscal 2009 budget is enacted. Both the ruling and opposition parties are responsible for clarifying campaign issues in the upcoming Lower House election through marathon debate on the fiscal 2009 budget.

From that perspective, as well, it is regrettable that DPJ Chairman Ichiro Ozawa did not take the podium. Hatoyama questioned the prime minister, while introducing the Environment New Deal Initiative, which Ozawa advocates. However, his presentation lacked punch. Ozawa, a potential candidate for the next prime minister, should have engaged in verbal confrontation with the prime minister.

Hatoyama criticized a government ordinance that approves "watari" (migrant birds) or the practice of retired officials jumping from one cushy job to another many times, receiving pensions and pay along the way. The prime minister said that government agencies are allowed to offer job referral services to retired bureaucrats during the three-year transition period under the revised National Civil Service Law. He then replied, "Job referral services by government agencies are necessary in order to faithfully implement the law intended to secure the efficacy of regulations on such matters as reemployment through the implementation of strict monitoring."

However, when Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Secretary General Hiroyuki Hosoda once again pressed the prime minister, saying, "'Watari' job referral services should be ended," the prime minister categorically said, "I have no intention of granting applications for watari job referral services in view of harsh criticism from the public."

The prime minister thus has gone a step further from his previous stance of strictly applying the government ordinance. Placing a ban on watari job referral services by ministries and agencies is only natural. It is logical to abolish the government ordinance that approves such services so as not to leave loopholes. The government will shortly map out a roadmap for reforming the public servant system, which will include the establishment of a Cabinet Personnel and Administrative Control Bureau. However, it would be impossible for it to obtain public understanding if it gives the impression that it is lenient toward the "watari" practice.

The prime minister gave the strong impression that he remained thoroughly committed to playing it safe in making replies so as to remain noncommittal.

Regarding measures to deal with piracy in waters off Somalia, Hatoyama questioned the prime minister about the guidelines for the use of weapons in the event of Maritime Self-Defense personnel being dispatched. However, he did not clarify his own party's stand, including the propriety of setting up a new law. His approach was thus irresponsible, causing anxieties about the DPJ's ability to run the government.

Hatoyama sought early dissolution of the Lower House. The prime minister replied, "I would like to clarify points of dispute with the opposition camp at an appropriate time and go to the people."

Budget deliberations are the best venue for that. We hope to hear fruitful debate.

(7) Japan, Russia at odds over disembarkation card submission

YOMIURI (Page 3) (Excerpts)  
January 30, 2009

Russian authorities demanded that Japanese government officials on a humanitarian mission submit disembarkation (E/D) cards before landing on one of the four disputed northern islands. This issue may lead to suspending the visa-free exchange visit program and eventually aggravating Japan-Russia relations.

Japan: "Submission would mean Japan's acceptance of Russian claim to its ownership

The Japanese officials returned to Nemuro Port, Hokkaido, from waters off Kunashiri Island yesterday afternoon. Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura commented that the Russian response is "beyond our comprehension."

Tokyo and Moscow exchanged diplomatic notes in 1998 in which both sides specified that Japanese nationals on a humanitarian mission are required to submit only these papers issued by the Japanese foreign minister before landing on the disputed northern islands: (1) the identification card; and (2) the form that enters the destination and other details. A member of the Foreign Ministry's European Affairs Bureau emphasized that Russia's demand for E/D cards this time goes against the diplomatic notes. Japanese officials fear that submitting E/D cards in accordance with Russia's domestic law would mean that Japan accepts Russia's claim that the island belongs to Russia.

There are four special programs for Japanese to visit the Russian-held but Japanese-claimed four Northern Territories - Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan, and the Habomai islet group: (1) Visa-free exchanges between former islanders and Russian residents on the islands, also involving those linked to campaigns for returning the four islands, politicians, and correspondents; (2) visits by former islanders and their relatives to graves of ancestors on the islands; (3) homecoming by former islanders and their relatives with no restrictions; and (4) humanitarian aid. The Russian government's introduction of this system that requires no immigration procedures reportedly stemmed from its consideration to the Northern Territories issue. Given this, unsuccessful negotiations on the latest issue could bring about negative effects, such as a suspension of the visa-free exchange program.

The Japanese government, however, does not want to develop the ongoing trouble into a major political issue. A senior Foreign Ministry official take this optimistic view: "The Russian government must have the same view as Japan's." The Russian side's explanation is that it is important to figure out how many people land on the islands. The Foreign Ministry is aiming to settle the situation by means of Japan giving information on the number of visitors through diplomatic channels as it did before.

Meanwhile, some government officials suggest the need for Japan to seek an early settlement by taking even flexible measures, as represented by this comment by Lower House member Muneo Suzuki: "Submitting E/D cards does not infringe on Japan's sovereignty. That

should be settled in a businesslike and technical way." A Russian government official said: "Submitting E/D cards under the visa-free exchange visit program is unrelated to both sides' claims to sovereignty over the territories."

Russia: Rule applied to all foreigners

In the past, Moscow tried to demonstrate its control of the four

northern islands by taking up seizure cases involving Japanese fishing boats in summit meetings and other important diplomatic events. Some observers take the view that even if Russia upsets Japan over the disembarkation card issue, Russia's position on sovereignty over the four islands will unlikely weaken.

Vladimir Nosov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's representative in Sakhalin Province, which has jurisdiction over the Northern Territories, said in a telephone interview with the Yomiuri Shimbun yesterday: "Russia will require all foreign travelers to submit E/D cards, based on its domestic law." Japan did not encounter such a request until last year since Russia revised its domestic laws in 2006. According to Nosov, "The Russian government's immigration agency has strictly applied the laws since the beginning of this year" in order to count the number of those entering and going out of the islands.

Russia has been irritated at Japan's stubborn attitude in recent Japan-Russia peace-treaty negotiations. Such frustration has driven it into taking "acts against the agreements reached between the two countries," according to a diplomatic source related to Japan-Russia relations. The Russian side has taken the view that Japan refused the compromise plan proposed in 2001 by then President Putin to resolve the territorial issue with Russia returning the Habomais and Shikotan based on the 1956 Japan-Soviet Union Joint Declaration. A political scientist specialized in Japan-Russia relations says that "the proposal was inconceivable in the days of the Soviet Union."

The Russian government has attributed the stagnation in recent negotiations to the Japanese side. Moscow has indicated that even if Japan-Russia relations deteriorate over the E/D card issue, "the responsibility will not lie with us."

President Medvedev invited Prime Minister Aso in a telephone conversation on Jan. 24 to a ceremony in mid-February in commemoration of the start of export of liquefied gas (LNG) to Japan under the Sakhalin-2 project. He also unofficially suggested holding a Japan-Russia summit meeting, indicating his eagerness toward cooperation with Japan in developing the Far East and East Siberia. The dominant view in the Russian government is that the issue of suspended humanitarian assistance by Japan should be settled not at a leaders' or government level but at a working level.

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